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Admiralty House  
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Dear Mr President —

When we met in Bermuda I undertook to consider as soon as possible with my colleagues your request for us to join with you in preparing Christmas Island for further atmospheric nuclear tests.

I have now discussed this question fully with the Cabinet. We recognised that the programme of tests now proposed seemed, so far as we could judge at present, to fall within the definitions of permissible nuclear tests which you and I made in the autumn. In these circumstances, whether we join with you in preparing Christmas Island or not, we should feel morally bound to support any decision which you might make to carry out this programme. My colleagues and I therefore agreed that it would be right to make available to you the facilities at Christmas Island which you require, subject, of course, to the conclusion of an agreement on scientific and technical collaboration as well as about the financial and administrative arrangements. As a contribution to scientific collaboration we would wish to place at your disposal certain United Kingdom techniques and experience, for example in observing nuclear weapons tests, which we believe would be of some value.

We made this decision on two assumptions. The first is that we can be satisfied, from the advice of our scientists working with yours, that the programme of tests proposed do indeed fall within our definitions of justifiable tests. From what I heard in Bermuda I do not in fact anticipate any difficulty here. Secondly, as I am sure you would agree, we should expect full consultation before a decision to start tests from Christmas Island is actually made. This is of special importance in the light of the proposals regarding a political initiative which I set out below. We think that in any announcement about the facilities at Christmas Island it would be better to state firmly that we had jointly decided that further tests were militarily necessary rather than saying only that we had agreed to make preparations for tests against a possible decision to hold them. At the same time, however, as you will see from the last section of this letter, we believe that an announcement in these terms should be accompanied by a determined new initiative towards disarmament and that it should indicate that the timing of tests could, to some extent, depend upon Soviet reactions to our proposals.

From what you said in Bermuda I believe that you yourself would take into account the general international situation at the time before making a final decision to resume tests and I hope therefore that you will agree with this general approach.

II

In our discussions the Cabinet considered the probable progress which the Russians in their latest tests have made in the field of anti-missile work, and the danger that without some similar effort on our side we might one day find ourselves at their mercy. Of course at the very moment when we are beginning to work in this field we have to consider that the 100 megaton weapon seems not merely to correspond with Mr. Khrushchev's natural instinct for magnitude but also to have valuable potential military importance and to pose a further difficult requirement for a defence system, at a time when it is not yet clear that defence will be possible even against missiles which must come much closer to their target before exploding. Even without this complication nobody knows whether either side will really be able to solve the immensely complicated problems of an anti-missile defensive system, towards which these are the first halting steps. Our scientific advisers, you will remember, said that, if it were not a matter on which national survival itself was at stake, they would say that it was impossible. But if, for such a stake, sufficient resources were developed and devoted to it, they could not definitely say that anything should be regarded as impossible. Yet, if we do what we are now contemplating, we shall be entering upon a new phase in this endless struggle, with all that this implies. When one adds to this the thought of the expenditure in money terms which will be necessary - and money terms are merely a convenient method of stating the vast resources, human and material, which are involved - it would really seem to any ordinary person who reflects calmly upon it that humanity is setting out on a path at once so fantastic and so retrograde, so sophisticated and so barbarous, as to be almost incredible. It certainly seems a strange irony, Mr. President, that I should have spent Christmas Day reflecting in what terms and by what arguments I should commend to my colleagues the dedication of Christmas Island for this purpose.

There are three aspects of this problem about which I am concerned. First, if we make these tests - modest in their size, without any serious effect in the pollution of the atmosphere and adding little from this point of view to the harm already done - undoubtedly the Russians will continue to do it with preparing but with carrying

out their next series. We shall later be forced to do the same; and so this contest will continue more or less indefinitely, each side trying to get the lead. But so heavy will be the expense, and so vast the claim upon resources, that I greatly fear the end may be what has nearly always been the end in these armament races - one side or the other, when it thinks it has the moment of superiority, will be tempted to put the issue to the test. The second point we ought to consider is whether there is any real justification on technical grounds for believing that an effective anti-missile system could be developed. For our small island, of course, there can be none; for if even eight or nine missiles of the present size were to get through there would be little left of us. For you or for the Russians the situation is a little different because of the sheer size of the territory. Nevertheless, I would imagine that with all the counter-measures, the decoys, the electronic devices and all the rest of it, it must be very doubtful indeed whether a defence system can be achieved which will provide the minimum protection. Thirdly, there is the position of all the other countries. If the test programme of the Great Powers goes on there is no hope of dealing with what you call the Nth country problem. Some countries will develop powerful systems, probably the Chinese and eventually the Germans - and, of course, the French. Nothing can stop them if the Great Powers go on. Others will develop nuisance systems - but they will be very formidable nuisances. And if all this capacity for destruction is spread about the world in the hands of all kinds of different characters - dictators, reactionaries, revolutionaries, madmen - then sooner or later, and certainly I think by the end of this century, either by error or folly or insanity, the great crime will be committed.

These are thoughts, Mr. President, about which I feel that you and I should ponder a little further. I ventured to put some of this to you in our short talks in Bermuda and it was because you were so responsive to the motives that lay behind that I am encouraged to send you this further analysis.

III

In Bermuda we covered a wide range of subjects. Apart from those mentioned in the Communiqué - Berlin, Nuclear Tests, the Congo, the European Common Market - we touched on a number of other points of almost equal importance. These included Laos and Viet-Nam and the general position in the Far East; the confused and always uncertain situation in the Middle East; Africa, where

almost equal dangers may follow "Colonialism" persisted in too long or abandoned too soon; the future of the emerging States like Ghana; and the likely development of the United Nations in its present form and under its present influence.

Running through all these discussions there was one common thread. All of these problems in their different ways reflect the great division which has dominated the world since the end of the second world war. At every point and on every issue is the contest between Communism and the Free World, each struggling to contain the other and to attract the support of the so-called unaligned nations.

The more I reflect on all these problems the more I am led to the conclusion that none can be satisfactorily dealt with singly. But if, on the other hand, there could be some genuine improvement in the underlying malady from which humanity suffers, fairly rapid solutions of the particular problems would follow. In recent years there have been two attempts to break through the deadlock which seemed at one time to present some hope. The first was the Geneva negotiations for the abolition of nuclear tests, and the second was the series of efforts, including the interchange of visits between statesmen on both sides of the Iron Curtain which led up to the Summit meeting in Paris in 1960. Both these attempts ended in failure. Looking back, I think one must agree that the major blame for both these failures lay with the Soviet Government although the Allies were not wholly free from responsibility. For instance, I am personally convinced that an agreement at Geneva could have been reached on the basis of the abolition of tests above the threshold. That would have given us the enormous advantage of the introduction of at least an elementary system of inspection and control in a field where from its very nature the Russian suspicions or accusations of espionage were less plausible.

Similarly, the Summit meeting in Paris was the culminating point of a long and carefully prepared sequence of events, all of which seemed to afford some expectation of a genuine detente. Yet it not only failed, but broke up in a disorderly and discreditable way, in which we had to carry some of the blame. At the time no-one seemed able to understand the excessive importance which Mr. Khrushchev attached to the U-2 Incident. But I am inclined to think now that there was more connection than we then believed between Geneva and Paris. Mr. Khrushchev may have felt a genuine sense of shock at the discovery of how much we knew about the positions of their large rockets, on which they were depending so greatly. This in turn may have affected their attitude in Geneva and, combined with the remarkable success of the United States with nuclear submarines and Polaris missiles, may have led to the Russian decision to carry out their recent tests, on the course been long engaged.

At any rate, whatever the cause, the only two big diplomatic attempts which promised any success proved a disastrous failure. There is however this degree of comfort to be drawn from what followed. Mr. Khrushchev originally announced his decision to sign a peace treaty with the East Germans as long ago as November 27, 1958. At the time of my visit to Moscow in February, 1959, he deferred this threat; and, although he renewed it after the Paris debacle, he is still showing some degree of moderation by refraining from implementing it even at the end of this year. I know there are some who say that this springs, not so much from a desire to appear reasonable towards the Western Allies and the world at large, as from his unwillingness to entrust dangerous decisions to Mr. Ulbricht and his friends. However that may be, we have been given a breathing space; and I know that it is your intention, in spite of all the difficulties inside the Western Alliance, to make full use of it.

The difficulty, as we all know, is to decide what to do. The somewhat sombre thoughts which I have developed can have no purpose unless they are intended to lead to at least some proposals for finding "a way out" of the maze in which we are set. It may be that there is no way out. It may be that we are condemned, like the heroes of the old Greek tragedies, to an ineluctable fate from which there is no escape; and that like those doomed figures we must endure it, with only the consolation of the admonitory and sometimes irritating commentaries of the chorus, the forerunners of the columnists of to-day. On the other hand, it may be that even those who cannot accept so pessimistic a view would feel it wiser to avoid any attempt to bring about a dramatic change of events and to rely upon "something turning up" and somehow postponing at least for a period a fatal crisis. All my life there have been two views about the best way of dealing with this sort of problem. I can remember these arguments before the first war; they were of course in full flush between the wars; and they are still subject to much debate. One line of argument suggests that we should keep patiently at work trying to chisel away the excrescences which deface the body politic of mankind, and hope by this method to remove one by one the major dangers, whether local or general, arriving eventually at a point when an effective all-round settlement can become practical politics. The other view has been that there are moments in history when it is better to take a bolder choice and put a larger stake upon a more ambitious throw. A similar dispute has gone on recently between those who would wish to narrow and those who would wish to widen the discussions on Berlin. Chancellor Adenauer and his friends, after some hesitation, seem to have come down upon the side of narrowing any negotiation so as to deal

only with access and the minimum amount of recognition of the D.D.R. required for practical purposes, thus avoiding such larger issues as the Oder-Neisse Line or the ultimate future of Germany. General de Gaulle, on the other hand, has seemed to argue that without a general detente over a wide field any limited agreement on Berlin is hardly worth the paper it is written on.

All these arguments of detail must not be allowed to obscure the basic fact that the balance of power and continued peace in the world is maintained by the deterrent power of the United States and the United Kingdom on the one side against that of the U.S.S.R. on the other. The future of the uncommitted world, which tries to remain neutral on this great issue is, in fact, dependent on the outcome. This lays a very great responsibility upon our two countries and I know, from our talks in Bermuda, that you feel as strongly as I do the over-riding need to find some way of breaking the deadlock between East and West. On the one side we have the problem of Berlin, on which we are now trying to find a basis for an understanding, and on the other the grim problem of the nuclear race, a new phase of which is opening before us and threatens to exhaust the resources of both sides.

We cannot tell at present how the Berlin exploration will go but at least we have a plan of campaign designed to test out the possibilities of agreement. We shall know in the next few weeks or months what prospects there are on this and it will certainly affect our whole approach to the question of relations with Russia. But in the meantime I believe we should make a supreme effort to make progress in the field of disarmament and nuclear tests, in which we at present have not worked out an effective plan of campaign. My idea is that you and we might agree upon a scheme of policy designed to give new impetus to the disarmament negotiations and to unlock the present log-jam. With great respect I would propose the following procedure and I beg you to consider it carefully and sympathetically.

IV

It has been agreed between us and the Russians that there will be an 18-power conference on Disarmament beginning in the middle of March. We must build on this. But there is no doubt that this rather unwieldy, heterogeneous group of countries is not likely to achieve results unless it is given impulsion and leadership by the main nuclear powers. My idea would be that you and I, who are in the lead on

the Western side, should take the initiative and invite Mr. Khrushchev to concert with us, before this committee meets, on the best methods of ensuring that practical progress is made. We might, for example, propose a conference of the Foreign Ministers of the three nuclear powers (perhaps joined by the French) backed by scientific as well as official advisers to meet before the opening of the Disarmament Commission in order to discuss the possibility of working as a team for its success. The purposes of this three (or four) power meeting would be:-

- (1) to reconcile our desire for adequate control over disarmament with the Soviet fear of espionage;
- (2) to try to determine rapidly the conditions in which a permanent abolition of nuclear tests could be agreed;
- (3) to discuss measures for ensuring greater security for the two sides pending an agreement on controlled disarmament;
- (4) to issue a joint declaration to implement the Irish resolution passed at the last session of the United Nations Assembly which enjoined nuclear powers not to relinquish control of nuclear weapons or to transfer knowledge relating to their manufacture to non-nuclear powers.

In proposing this meeting I suggest that we should make a declaration that we intend to make the success of the Disarmament Conference a major plank in our foreign policy, that we will take personal responsibility for the conduct of the negotiations and perhaps that we or our Foreign Ministers will personally attend the first meetings of the Commission.

If you should agree that a programme along these lines was desirable the next question would be how to present it both to our own public opinions and to the Russians. So far as I can judge opinion in the United States, there has been a very natural inclination to resume tests following the large-scale Russian tests. Yet I would also think that there will be a growing feeling of despair if nothing can be done to stop the present drift in the world. As regards my country, while our partnership with you in all this goes right back to the days of the Second World War and is highly valued, a decision to resume tests and to make British territory available for the purpose

will not be readily understood unless it is accompanied by some public indication that we were making a new move to influence events. For that reason I would want to be able to announce at the same time the broad lines of this proposal and the decision to make available facilities at Christmas Island. On the other hand, if we are to achieve anything practical with the Russians, we must not handle this as a matter of public statement only but must approach Khrushchev direct and make it clear to him that we have a genuine desire for his co-operation in checking the nuclear arms race. Moreover, it would be important not to give him the impression that by a proposal of this kind we were seeking to avoid the issue of Berlin on which as we well know he is determined to achieve some settlement. My suggestion would be, therefore, that in addition to a public statement of our intentions, we should make a private communication of a rather more detailed kind to Khrushchev urging him to co-operate with us in a genuine effort to give impetus to the Disarmament Commission's work and to join in a meeting of Foreign Ministers of the nuclear powers on the lines described above. The purpose of the private approach to Khrushchev would be to indicate that we were genuinely concerned to save humanity from the threat and the wastage of a new competition designed to provide immunity against nuclear attack, a competition which we believe would almost certainly be fruitless and which could distort the whole economic life of the world.

It would be necessary of course to inform General de Gaulle and Dr. Adenauer of what we had in mind and perhaps to invite the French to take part in the initial approach to Khrushchev.

I suggest that we could meet the need to carry public opinion with us if we could make public statements on the following lines shortly after our approach to Khrushchev. We would say that:-

(a) in our view the present technical situation justifies and indeed requires the West to make a further series of nuclear tests for purely military reasons. For this reason the United States and British Governments have decided to make preparations for such a series in various places including Christmas Island;

(b) we recognise that further tests by the West may be followed by more Soviet tests and so the cycle will continue indefinitely. Nevertheless, we see no justification here for abandoning our present plans but we are deeply concerned at the situation in which we find ourselves and for the future of mankind if a halt to the nuclear arms race cannot be called;

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(c) we are therefore determined to make every effort to pull the world out of this rut and are making proposals to the Russians to this end (of which we can give a short outline); we hope that the result of our proposals will be to enable the nuclear Powers to stop testing altogether as the first move towards general disarmament.

If you agree with the above, I think the first step is to set up machinery for urgent discussion between our two countries on the programme envisaged and on the technical problems involved. This could include not only the question of tests and a disarmament programme but also, perhaps, of measures to ensure greater security in Europe and possibly elsewhere, including anti-surprise attack measures (notification of major military moves, observation teams, etc.) and, if we can overcome the doubts of the French and the Germans, limitation and inspection of armaments in specified areas not limited to particular countries. I would like David Ormsby-Gore to take this on for us with such assistance as he requires. After that we should have to try to bring the French in and perhaps other allies; all this in preparation for the 18-power Disarmament Commission's work. As there is very little time I would hope that we could get on with this work straight away.

As I said, all this will be affected by the progress of the discussions on Berlin. If the probe is unsuccessful and we have to hold a negotiation in a bad atmosphere, we in the West will not be in a good situation. But, as you told me in Bermuda, this would not be the end of the attempt to reach an understanding with the Soviet Union and it might be that the approach which I am proposing on disarmament would help us in making a new move to negotiate with the Russians on the serious situation which would then have arisen in Germany. If, on the other hand, the Berlin explorations go well and seem likely to lead to a negotiation between Foreign Ministers on that subject, there again general prospects might be improved by the other initiative and we could perhaps link the two negotiations with one another. We might possibly envisage a Summit meeting later on, to conclude a series of agreements covering these two major problems and thus pave the way to a general improvement in East/West relations.

It is, of course, easy to do nothing or to do nothing in particular. But, on the whole, it is not the things one did in one's life that one regrets but rather the opportunities missed.

With warm regards,

*Yours very sincerely  
John F. Kennedy*

The President of the United States of America